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United States Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Research Administration  
Bureau of Animal IndustryRAISING CHINCHILLAS 1/-----  
DESCRIPTION AND NATURAL HABITAT

The chinchilla (Chinchilla laniger and other species) is a small ground rodent somewhat resembling the common squirrel and weighing about 1-1/2 pounds at maturity. The female is slightly larger than the male. Both sexes are a delicate French gray in color, darkly mottled on the surface, with a bluish slate tint beneath. The fur is dense, soft, lustrous, and silky, that on the back nearly 1 inch long in the finer skins, that on the sides somewhat longer and thinner. The several species vary in the shade of the gray color and in the quality of their fur.

The native home of the chinchilla is on rocky ground on cliffs, hillsides, and high plateaus, at altitudes of 8,000 to 10,000 feet, in the Andes Mountains of Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. These countries prohibited the sale of live animals and skins after the chinchilla had almost reached the point of extermination there.

A few live animals were brought to the United States by a private individual about 1923 and the total number now (1944) in this country is about 20,000 distributed in more than twenty States. Through experimentation during the past 20 years, breeders have developed fairly satisfactory methods of management and of feeding, breeding, and housing.

The Federal Government has not carried on experimental work with chinchillas, except in a very limited manner and the following suggestions for raising them in captivity have been obtained from successful breeders. Further changes in management will undoubtedly follow in rapid succession as the breeders gain experience.

## FEEDING

Chinchillas usually feed early in the evening and during the night. Their food consists mainly of vegetable matter. In captivity they are fed once daily, late in the afternoon, when about 2 ounces of such concentrated foods as rolled oats, rolled wheat, dried bread, whole yellow corn, and wheat-germ meal are given. It may be that whole grains other than corn can also be utilized just as satisfactorily as the crushed grains. In addition,

1/ Formerly Wildlife Leaflet 151 issued in December 1944 by the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior.

soybean meal, linseed meal, or peanut meal in pea-size cake or pellet form should be quite palatable and beneficial. A small quantity of such fresh green food as lettuce, lawn clippings, dandelions, carrots, and weeds of any kind should be fed daily. Bright green leafy alfalfa or other legume hay should be available at all times. A few twigs are supplied daily by many breeders. All food should be wholesome; it should not be thrown upon the floor of the pen, but should be placed in containers that cannot be easily contaminated. A plentiful supply of fresh water should be constantly available to the animals. Some feed companies have pellets prepared especially for chinchillas.

### BREEDING

Breeding of chinchillas in captivity is not restricted to any one season, as young have been recorded born in every month. The adults are said, however, to mate most readily in December and in March. Pair matings are most common, though in some instances one male has been mated with several females. The polygamous tendency undoubtedly can be further developed through selective matings and improved management methods. The gestation period is about 111 days, and usually not more than two litters are produced each year. From one to three young occur each litter. Females will frequently breed within a few hours after giving birth. After mating the male and female should be put into separate pens. Careful records should be kept.

The young at birth have their eyes open and are fully covered with fur. The number in a litter varies from one to four, the average being two. At the weaning age of about 2 months the animals weigh 8 to 9 ounces. Though chinchillas will breed at about 9 months, they do not become fully mature until they are about 18 months old.

### PENS AND DENS

Several kinds of pens have been tried out, though no standard can yet be recommended. Small pens, similar to those for minks or rabbits, that are accessible to the caretaker from an alleyway, are becoming more popular. Wire floors of hardware cloth having about 3 meshes to the inch are commonly used. A small, wooden, boxlike den with a narrow chute constructed to provide indirect access to the interior seems to be satisfactory. Bedding is not used in the nest box and on some ranches the young are born on the wire floor of the nest box. A removable top, or lid, is essential to make the interior accessible when it is necessary to catch an animal or clean out the den. The roof of the building containing the pens should be thoroughly insulated against excessive summer heat.

Many breeders use electrical heating units in the dens at littering time but supply no bedding. A dust box in which the animals may roll should be placed in each pen.

### CHINCHILLA FUR

The ancient Peruvians prized chinchilla fur and used it for coverings and for other purposes. Soft as down and silky in appearance, it occupies first place in point of texture and has always been in favor whenever it appeared on the market. Close examination of the pelt shows that a fur tuft usually comes from one hair follicle. The leather is light and cannot be worked so as to be

entirely satisfactory for making fitted coats, but it is strong enough for loose wraps, neck pieces, muffs, and trimmings, and when so used it makes up into beautiful apparel.

In 1939 a number of pelts taken from nonbreeders and excess males furred out at high elevations are said to have been used in the first garment made from chinchilla furs produced in the United States. At present chinchillas are raised almost exclusively for sale as breeding stock, and for this purpose the animals may be raised at low altitudes. It is problematical when the sale of pelts will be the primary purpose in production. Two auction sales of chinchilla skins taken from surplus animals raised in the United States have been held during the last two years.

The Department of Agriculture does not maintain a list of chinchilla breeders. Any one interested in obtaining information on prices or sources of breeding animals should write to Secretary, National Chinchilla Breeders of America, Inc., 3003 Connor St., Salt Lake City, Utah.

Additional information on chinchillas may be obtained from the local libraries and by consulting some of the fur farm publications.

